

Published as: Wheeler, K (2014) 'Nice Save! The Moral Economies of Recycling in Sweden and England', *Environment & Planning D*, Vol. 32: 704-720.

## **Nice Save! The moral economies of recycling in England and Sweden**

Abstract: My aim in this paper is to develop the concept of moral economy by exploring how moral principles intertwine and interact with forms of economic organisation. Through applying a holistic moral economy framework (Bolton and Laaser, 2013), informed by the writings of Polanyi (1944, 1957), Thompson (1993) and Sayer (2000, 2005, 2011), this paper explores institutional variations in the moral economies of recycling, at the same time as paying attention to those lay normativities that shape consumer's everyday interactions with their waste. The starting point for this paper comes from the observation that moral messages used to promote recycling differ between Sweden and England. In Sweden, the protection and stewardship of the natural environment are key tropes whereas in England recycling is variously promoted as an action that saves the environment and public money. I show that the content of these moral messages is closely related to the system of recycling provision within a country, together shaping nationally distinct moral economies of recycling.

Keywords: Moral economy, Recycling, Waste

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In recent years, social scientists have become interested in questions of ethics and morality, (Sayer, 2000, 2005, 2011; Smith, 2000; Trentmann, 2007), particularly in the field of consumption where growth of ethical goods (like fair-trade) has encouraged scholars to ask how consumers have been made responsible for an array of moral and political issues (Barnett, Cloke et al, 2011; Goodman, 2004; Varul, 2009; Wheeler, 2012). A striking feature of existing research is the role that different institutions play in constructing the responsible 'citizen-consumer' who is motivated to act because of their commitment to moral/political projects, rather than in line with their selfish desires (*homo economicus*). Recycling is described as a form of ethical consumerism because its practice is linked to environmental and social goals, i.e. reducing carbon emissions, preventing landfill disposal, saving local municipal funds. Institutions from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors play a crucial role in constructing these moral economies of recycling and, as this paper will show, there are important variations between Sweden and England that can be linked to the wider institutional systems of provision of which they are part.

The cultural variability of ethical consumption across comparative contexts is an under-developed area and yet, in the handful studies conducted, considerable differences have been noted (Kjærnes, Harvey et al, 2007, Varul, 2009; Wheeler, 2012). For example, Varul discovered that the national context of fair-trade consumption informs the way people realise their responsibilities to distant others and construct themselves as ethical consumers. Different infrastructures of provision (supermarkets versus alternative outlets), histories of colonialism and visions of the consumer (the consumer that regulates the market through free choice versus consumers being guided by expert agencies to make the right choice) influences the moral economy of fair-trade in UK and Germany respectively. Similarly, in their study of consumer trust in food across six European countries, Kjærnes, Harvey et al (2007) discovered significant

variations in levels of consumer activism which they related back to how state regulation and market responsibility are institutionalised in different countries – with consumers in Norway least likely to engage in consumer activism owing to their high levels of trust in state institutions to regulate the market and consumers in the UK most likely to identify with the 'active consumer' model exercising their right to choose.

This paper builds on these insights to show how moral economies of recycling are constituted through interactions between institutional systems of provision, customs within communities and individuals' everyday reflections on the practice of sorting their waste. It asks how citizen-consumers in Sweden and England – countries that represent quite different welfare regimes (Esping-Anderson, 1990) – are persuaded to participate, focusing on how moral obligations are embedded within markets and the shaping of these moral messages by institutional systems of provision, collective customs and consumers' everyday reflections. After introducing a holistic moral economy framework that brings together individuals, institutions and their practices (Bolton & Laaser, 2013), I present findings from a qualitative study of recycling at the institutional and household level. In so doing, I show how moral economies are assembled from different parts and how they interact with political economies and systems of provision. I also reveal how the success of policy initiatives to encourage citizen-consumers to recycle relies on the perceived legitimacy of state intervention and the lay normativities of ordinary people.

### **Moral economy revisited**

Whilst the term 'moral economy' has most commonly been used to refer to 'traditional' or 'pre-modern' societies (because the economy was so embedded in social relations of solidarity and reciprocity that it was impossible to separate economic systems from the wider moral universe of action), this article maintains that all economies are moral economies. 'Moral economy' has been defined as 'the study of the ways in which economic activities, in the broad sense, are influenced

by moral-political norms and sentiments, and how conversely, those norms are comprised by economic forces' (Sayer, 2000: 80). This useful theoretical definition highlights the interactions between, and co-constitution of, moral principles and economic activities. However, the concept remains under-developed despite its widespread usage and there is a need to adopt an approach to studying 'moral economy' that can encompass both its institutional formation and everyday shaping by actors from within. Bolton and Laaser (2013) draw together different strands of the study of moral economy – informed by the writings of Polanyi (1944; 1957), E.P. Thompson (1991) Sayer (2005, 2011) – into a holistic analytical frame that accounts for both individual agency and institutionalised structures of community and political economy. The rest of this section introduces this analytical frame before applying it to the study of moral economies of recycling.

Polanyi's (1944; 1957) groundbreaking thesis refutes the separatist position between market and society and in so doing provides the building-blocks of a coherent moral economy approach (Bolton & Laaser, 2013). Polanyi challenged the idea of the self-regulating market and instead argued that all economies are underpinned by social, political and moral values which enable them to function. Whilst the market tends towards the disembedding of the economy from social relations, there is a counter movement by the state which seeks to constrain the market and embed social and moral obligations within market relations. Polanyi's ideas inspired the 'new economic sociology' which sought to overcome the neglect of social, ethical and cultural factors in economic theory (Fourcade and Healy 2007; Granovetter, 1985). Polanyi's argument that 'the human economy... is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and noneconomic' led scholars to explore the shifting place of the economy in society and discover how economic processes are 'instituted at different times and places' (Polanyi, 1957: 7). The usefulness of Polanyian thinking for the exploration of moral economies of recycling in comparative contexts is found in charting how economic processes are differentially instituted in Sweden and England, considering the divisions of labour within waste management and how

they foster relations of reciprocity. It also calls for an exploration of how the state intervenes to ensure that the unfettered market does not destroy 'the human character of labour and the natural resources of the environment' (Bolton and Laaser, 2013: 512).

However, looking at state and institutional relationships only takes us so far and does not explore how communities and collective movements can resist marketisation of waste and together oppose unfair or destructive economic practices. E.P. Thompson's (1991) conception of moral economy is instructive in this respect. His examination of food riots in the eighteenth century revealed how communities opposed unfair prices of grain in defence of their 'traditional rights', using principles of the older 'paternalist model' to justify their objections to the encroaching free-market economy. Whilst Thompson was cautious about his conception of 'moral economy' being applied to different cases, his idea that people are the 'bearers of historical customs and moral evaluations of their community' adds a different layer to the analytical scaffold of moral economy (Bolton and Laaser, 2013: 513). At this layer, we seek to uncover where ideas about recycling emerge and the role that community and interest groups may play in promoting ideas about responsible waste management (for example environmental justice campaigners who oppose waste disposal/treatment facilities in their communities), as well as how communal legitimacy for particular policies is established. Taken together with the institutional understandings, we are able to uncover both how the organisation of the systems of recycling and the customs of those acting within them shape distinctive moral economies.

The final element of this moral economy framework is informed by Sayer's (2005, 2011) concept of 'lay normativity', bridging the gap between institutional/community norms and people's everyday reflective capacities. Here questions about 'what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for and what is not' (Sayer, 2005: 6) take centre stage, revealing the diversity and complexity of social and moral life. Humans are evaluative beings capable of embracing or rejecting community norms and offering reasons for participating in economic practices or not. Individuals may join together in collective movements as a result of unfair economic practices or

alternatively they may prioritise their own family or local needs. At the heart of Sayer's concept is the reciprocal character of social relations and an understanding of humans as needy and vulnerable beings who can flourish or suffer under certain conditions. By paying attentions to people's lay normativities surrounding recycling, we learn how the demands of governments, institutions and communities affect individuals in their daily lives and their response to these demands. Gregson, Meltcalfe et al's (2007) study was particularly strong in this respect, revealing how practices of saving and wasting were implicated in the maintenance of family and social relations. I have argued elsewhere that attempts to change people's behaviour towards more sustainable goals must take account of lay normativities if they are to be successful (Wheeler, 2012). Of course, these lay normativities emerge in distinct socio-cultural and institutional contexts thus highlighting how crucial it is to pay attention to all three analytical levels of this framework. It is through interactions between and within institutions, communities and individuals that morals and markets are co-constituted and challenged.

In what follows, I apply this moral economy framework to recycling practices in Sweden and England, focusing first on institutional divisions of labour and political economies of waste; second, on the collective customs that promote and legitimise responsible waste management; finally, on consumers that recycle and their evaluative reflections on their engagement in this practice. Before turning to this task, I outline how this research was conducted.

### **Research design and data collection**

The material presented is taken from a wider ERC-funded project,<sup>1</sup> whose aim is to revise the foundational concept of 'division of labour' to take account of the work that consumers routinely perform in order to use, re-use and dispose of goods and services. The recycling of household waste offers a unique opportunity to explore this 'consumption work' because the consumer sits both at the end and starting point of the global market economy of materials re-use. By sorting their waste for recycling, and in some cases transporting this waste to bring-bank

sites, consumers exchange materials they have previously bought with a third party who then transforms them into commodities on the market.

A comparative approach brings into sharper focus the implications of the distinctive arrangements of work that consumers are expected and enabled to perform. Waste management practices differ substantially across the world, with countries in Asia and Africa relying upon the informal labour of 'waste pickers' to recover recyclable material, whilst countries in Europe and America utilise varying configurations of public and private modes of organised waste management provision (Davies 2008). England and Sweden were selected because of their different historical commitments to recycling, as well as the different expectations placed upon the consumer. In Sweden, interest in recycling dates back to the 1970s and consumers must separate their recyclable waste and transport it to bring-stations in a system which is common across the country. In England, by contrast, recycling is a relatively recent addition to the household's repertoire of domestic activities. Here consumers have to sort their recyclable waste which is then collected from their homes. Unlike Sweden, there is not one standard recycling practice but considerable variation between local authorities across England.

Importantly, for studying institutional variations in the moral economies of recycling, Sweden and England represent different welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990) with their public/private sector dominance respectively shaping the provision of waste management services. Esping-Andersen's thesis has been critiqued but the three ideal-types he identified continue to be employed when differentiating between political cultures (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Sweden is described as a social democratic regime where the market is 'crowded out' and state policy is based upon principles of universalism and solidarity – 'all benefit; all are dependent; and all will presumably feel obliged to pay' (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 169). Although social democratic principles are arguably under threat from processes of marketisation, there remain high levels of generalised trust, low levels of inequality and a continuing role for the state in the provision of public services in Swedish society (Gärtner and Prado, 2012). England, on the

other hand, is characterised as a liberal regime, in which citizens rely upon the market to maintain their standard of living with the state only stepping in when the market fails. This model is associated with high levels of social inequality and privatisation. As we shall see, waste management provision is shaped by these diverse regime types and the moral messages employed to encourage citizens to recycle reflect the roles of state and market within society.

Thirty qualitative interviews were conducted with recycling and waste experts in the two countries in 2011, including representatives from waste management companies and third sector organisations, policy makers, municipal officers and academics. Questions sought to elicit general understandings of the organisation of waste management, the role of the consumer within the system of provision, the contribution of the public and private sectors, the dominant methods of waste/recycling collection and the reliance on particular waste technologies. This primary research was complemented by documentary sources, in particular educational/promotional materials which sought to encourage consumers to recycle. Following the 'expert' interviews, a household study was undertaken in 2012 with thirty households in England,<sup>2</sup> to uncover how recycling is practically achieved on an everyday basis and consumers' reflections on their participation. Although a household study was not conducted in Sweden, I draw on two major qualitative studies when discussing the organisation and understandings of recycling by consumers in Sweden (Ewert, Henriksson et al 2009; Skill, 2008; Skill & Gyberg 2010).<sup>3</sup> The research design thus allows for the moral economy of recycling to be explored at both the institutional and individual level.

### **Sweden: Recycling for the environment**

#### **Institutional system of provision**

In Sweden, the state plays a key role in overseeing and providing waste management services. As the first country to establish an environmental protection agency and pass comprehensive environmental protection legislation, Sweden is proud of its status as a world environmental



leader and waste management policy and provision has been shaped by this environmental concern. The government showed an early interest in recycling, with the principle of producer responsibility introduced into policy in 1975 (although without any specific measures to realise this). A deposit scheme for returnable aluminium cans was established in 1984 because of fears about littering in nature. In a radical move (following their German counterparts), producer responsibility for packaging waste was introduced in 1992 and became law in 1994. This Government Bill (1992/93: 180) aimed to increase recycling by giving producers the 'legal, physical and economic responsibility for collecting and disposing of certain end-of-life products'. 5,800 unmanned recycling bring-stations were installed across Sweden and consumers were expected to bring their sorted packaging-waste to these stations. In the same year, the deposit system for drink's bottles was extended to include PET-bottles (managed by the not-for-profit organisation, Returpack). In 1999, fifteen environmental quality objectives were developed to guide environmental action at all levels of society and implemented within the Environmental code - an integrated piece of legislation to promote sustainable development that replaced the Environmental Protection Act. The environmental objectives impose targets to be met within a generation and progress towards them must be closely monitored by all levels of government, including those responsible for waste management.

What should be taken from this brief overview is the interventionist role that the state plays in ensuring waste management practices are environmentally sound. Rather than leaving waste management to market forces, the state steps in and embeds principles of care towards the environment. This is further secured through the public, not-for-profit basis under which waste management is organised in Sweden. The producer's system is managed by a not-for-profit organisation, Förpacknings-och Tidningsinsamlingen (FTI), which collects fees from producers of packaging in order to fund the collection and processing of materials deposited by consumers into the bring-stations. The material is always the property of the producers and is therefore not open on the market to be sold for a profit, thus minimising the drive for marketisation of these

materials and fostering principles of reciprocity within the processes of distribution and exchange. Waste that is not categorised as packaging – e.g. food waste, household waste and bulky waste – is the responsibility of Sweden's 290 municipalities. Each municipality decides how to organise their waste management activities but they must do so efficiently and appropriately for the environment, in line with the Environmental Code. Incineration is the dominant method of waste treatment and incineration plants are usually owned by collectives of municipalities that power district heating systems. Importantly, the private sector plays a limited role in waste management provision because of the way responsibility has been divided between municipalities and producers – their main role is to collect waste on behalf of municipalities/producers and they have little involvement in processing or marketisation of waste materials.

Therefore, the state (both national and local) plays the central role in shaping the moral economy of recycling, with the market always operating against the backdrop of established environmental concerns and legislation within the public and not-for-profit sector. Swedish national political culture is 'infiltrated by the concerns of environmentalists' so that 'society in general has become an environmental 'movement'' (Jamieson, Eyerman et al, 1990: 60). This sentiment is certainly reflected in the way that the local state encourages consumers to contribute to the system. For example, in 2008, the municipal association for waste management, *Avfall Sverige*, initiated a nationwide multi-media campaign to encourage households to dispose of their hazardous waste at the appropriate drop-off stations at municipal recycling centres. This campaign introduced the now famous tagline '*Sveriges största miljörörelse*' or 'Sweden's largest environmental movement' which has been used in subsequent municipal campaigns to promote recycling. As the editor of the *Avfall Sverige* newsletter, explains

The boastful tone of, 'Sweden's largest environmental movement,' gained much attention. It implied that all 12,000 professionals who work with Sweden's homes and businesses – together with the public – were together Sweden's largest environmental

movement; working alongside each other to perform one of the most important jobs in Sweden. (Jönsson, 2008)

Just as Swedish culture is embedded with the concerns of environmentalists, citizen-consumers were enrolled into the collective environmental movement by virtue of sorting their waste for recycling. All are called upon to contribute to this system and all benefit from its successful operation – in terms of a cleaner environment, and a cheap source of heat/energy from incineration plants. The existence of a single, national system of recycling (bring stations for packaging and incineration for general waste) enables a unified and consistent message to be delivered.

#### Collective customs and the legitimacy of this moral economy

The Swedish system, which expects the household not only to sort but transport their waste to bring-banks, does ask a lot of the consumer and relies upon their acculturation into moral norms and duties of ecological citizenship. The experts interviewed agreed that caring for nature and the environment are sentiments that have a long tradition in Swedish heritage.

#### ***Do people find it difficult to recycle in Sweden?***

*No normally not. I would say they are very keen to do it [...] It's part of the awareness from the Swedish people I would say.*

#### ***Where does that awareness come from?***

*It's a long-term idea, we are a big country with a small population living close to nature, interest in nature and interest to take care of your nature, and that has been at least since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and more and more awareness from the 50s until now. And also the children with the schools out in nature and things like that are educated to take care of nature so that is something that has been built up during the years.*

[Representative from Stockholm Municipality]

Rather than nudging citizens to make the right choices (as in England), Sweden has invested in educating children to establish a shared sense of responsibility to look after nature and care for the environment. There are very few civil society organisations that promote recycling in Sweden but the exception is *Hall Sverige Rent* (HSR) (Keep Sweden Clean). This organisation was founded in 1983 by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and Returpack – although the campaign to 'Keep Sweden Clean' dates back to the 1960s and was launched by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC). One of HSR's key campaigns is the National Rubbish Picking Day, which has been running for many years and involves all sections of society (especially kindergartens and schools) in a 'demonstration' against litter. In 2013, 714,691 Swedes took part in the annual rubbish picking day (HSR, 2013) and many of the experts interviewed highlighted this campaign as key for promoting a responsible attitude to waste management amongst young people/society. This national event generates a sense of collective duty of care for nature, reflecting established ideas of the relations between humans and the environment in Sweden. Anyone in Sweden has the 'right of public access' (*Allemansrätten*) to nature as long as they preserve it and do not destroy it.

It is striking that there are so few social movement organisations promoting recycling in Sweden – neither the SSNC nor Friends of the Earth Sweden run campaigns on recycling, suggesting that citizens do not object to current practices nor join together to challenge or criticise the state. Nordic civil society organisations tend to act as 'accepted partners of neo-corporatist arrangements instead of being engaged in pluralistic pressure politics and lobbying activities' (Wijkström and Zimmer, 2011: 11). As a social democratic state, there are high levels of trust in the recycling system and a feeling that the municipality is acting in the best interest of its citizens. In her qualitative study with Swedish households, Skill highlights these high levels of trust in 'responsible authorities' to take care of environmental problems (Skill, 2008: 167). Incineration is a case in point; in Sweden, incineration is understood as a form of recycling because it returns to consumers in the form of heat and electricity (Avfall Sverige, 2011).

Although other countries have established environmental lobbies against incineration technologies, in Sweden these lobbies are not present because there is trust in the state to act in an environmentally responsible way. Indeed, in 1985, concerns were raised about the environmental impact of incineration and the state issued a temporary moratorium on new plants until the environmental impact caused by these facilities was reduced. Swedish citizens trust the municipality to behave responsibly and, therefore, incineration is not problematic.

*Ärnst: It is like Ärla says, they burn the waste in Ljungby, and it turns into energy.*

*Ärla: Yes they make energy out of it in Ljungby.*

*Ärnst: In that sense I don't think it is a problem at all.*

*Ärla: No, we think about it so that it doesn't become a problem.*

(Ärla and Ärnst, pensioners in their 70s, cited in Skill, 2008: 167-8)

These high levels of trust, along with efforts to encourage children to respect the environment and existing rights of public access to nature, together help to secure the willing participation of citizens in the moral economy of recycling.

#### Lay normativities and the moral economy of recycling

This final layer of the moral economy framework seeks to uncover consumer's everyday reasoning for engaging (or not) in recycling activities. In Skill's (2008) study of environmental practices, recycling was the most common sustainable action that households regularly performed. The experts interviewed agreed that people feel a duty to recycle for the environment. This sentiment is captured by Wiktorina (a mature student) when she describes her reasons for recycling.

*It feels like I'm contributing by pulling my straw to the ant hill and helping the environment.*

(cited in Skill, 2008: 238)

Wiktorina likens her trips to the recycling stations to the efforts of thousands of ants making the same journey to achieve a common goal. There is a sense of a collective duty amongst Swedish

citizens to recycle for the environment's sake. Similarly, one of the respondents in Ewert, Henriksson et al's (2009:44) research explained their reason for participating as being environmentally-motivated

*You feel that you are in this ecocycle helping to improve the environment and care for the environment, so you feel more motivated to do it*

Part of this environmental morality encompasses the idea of resource stewardship and the protection of the environment for future generations. When asked why they thought recycling was important, many referred to their own children and grandchildren and the need to protect the environment for them (Skill and Gyberg, 2010). The moral economy of recycling can be linked to wider notions of environmental citizenship, as well as being embedded within relations of familial care. Indeed, this framing of the moral economy has been utilised by the not-for-profit agency responsible for collecting packaging materials – a change in the sorting requirements for mixed plastics led the FTI to launch a print-advertising campaign that depicted the Olympic high-jump medallist, Stefan Holm, with a small child on his back. The text read

*'Recycle your Plastic Packaging. I do – for the children and the future'* (Stefan Holm)

Sweden is a world leader in recycling and we will get even better. Now all soft plastic packaging is recyclable. Think that one kilogram of recycled plastic packaging reduces carbon emissions by two kilos! So don't throw your plastic into the trash, recycle for the environment and our children's sake. (FTI, 2008)

Morals surrounding the environment and the protection of one's family are together constituted within the everyday practices of consumers and the institutional framing of this sustainable action.

Whilst consumers understand recycling as a positive environmental action, there are inevitably some who question the benefits of their efforts because of the way the system is organised. Consumers must transport the material to bring-stations often by car, thus causing them to reflect upon the environmental gains of recycling.

*We were looking and now I have found one [recycling station] on the way to work, which I pass anyway. Because, if you have to make an extra trip with the car, you lose what you have gained. [laughs] And then it is not that environmentally friendly anymore. Then you might just as well throw it in the regular waste.*

(Zoran, 36-years, Printmaker, cited in Skill, 2008: 183)

Washing cans with warm water was another common challenge and norms of cleanliness and the desire to keep one's house tidy whilst storing materials often overrode environmental concerns; as Regina (41-year old Administrator) asks 'who wants to keep containers at home that are not thoroughly cleaned?' (ibid: 184). Different values collide when consumers decide whether it make sense to recycle or not.

Importantly, the alternative to recycling materials is to treat them as regular or burnable waste and this is not viewed as problematic. A respondent in Ewert, Henriksson et al's study (2009: 29) describes the process of washing a yoghurt pot and decides it is just as efficient to put this out for incineration as to make the effort to recycle it as material

*It does not happen often but sometimes when you are in a hurry you do not have time [...] I throw it in the residual waste. It's not that bad.*

Having said this, Sweden has high material recycling rates so the majority of people are using the recycling stations.

Interestingly, those who throw their recyclable materials into the regular waste are not stigmatized as the 'irresponsible other' (Skill and Gyberg, 2010). It is those who 'free ride the system out of economic interest, who littered and left recyclable goods at other places than at the designed depots' who are thought of as morally irresponsible (ibid: 1874-5). Undermining the collective spirit of participation by leaving their garbage in public spaces (so as not to have to pay the weight or volume-based fees to dispose of them properly) and damaging the natural environment for others, makes people the target of moral judgement. Immigrants and those not brought up in Sweden are often characterised as the 'irresponsible other', revealing how moral

boundary drawing reflects existing socio-economic and cultural boundaries (Sayer, 2005). Swedes are proud of their identity as world-leaders in environmental issues and it is this identity that the irresponsible other is judged against.

### **England: Recycling to save public money**

#### **Institutional system of provision**

Waste management in England varies greatly between and even within local authority areas making the identification of a coherent moral economy of recycling more difficult than in Sweden. As a neo-liberal regime, the market plays an important role in the delivery of key public services in England and waste management is no exception. Local authorities (or municipalities) have responsibility for organising waste management within their locality but they increasingly procure private companies to provide these services for them. Landfill, or controlled tipping, has been the dominant method of disposal since the Second World War, being a relatively cheap and safe method of disposal, owing to ready-availability of suitable clay sites. Successive governments have been reluctant to invest in alternatives and have not proactively intervened to protect the environment offering a stark contrast to Sweden. The government has been described as 'environmentally lethargic' and 'slow to recognize and understand the environment as a distinct policy area' (McCormick, 1991: 9).

Interest in recycling and the impetus to search for alternatives to landfill have emerged as a response to external pressures from the EU and campaigning groups. Legislation from the EU in the 1980s led to the establishment of the first government target for recycling; 25 per cent of household waste by 2000 (a target the country failed to meet) (Waste Online, 2004). But the legislation that had the most impact was the EU Landfill Directive (1999). This tightened the regulations on the tipping of biodegradable waste and contributed to making landfill an ever-increasing burden on local authority budgets; the Landfill Tax currently stands at £72/tonne in



2013 and is set to rise to £80/tonne by 2014. The experts interviewed agreed that the Landfill Tax has been the key driver of recycling in England:

*Recycling has actually grown from a peripheral activity to a core activity in that now the best part of half the waste stream is going through some sort of recycling process. Probably a key driver in that is the landfill tax which is pushing many of those who are running the tip and haul, when you take waste and shove it into a landfill, they are now realising that they can't continue to do that because the cost of taking it to landfill is more expensive than doing something else with it, whether it's just running it through a picking belt and then sending it off to landfill, because diversion is worth it.*

[Independent UK Waste Expert]

The drive to reduce reliance on landfill has been motivated by environmental values (albeit externally imposed) but at the same time, it saves local authorities money. This has been made possible because responsibility for recycling does not lie with the producers of packaging. Unlike Sweden, the state does not intervene in the market to impose regulations on producers so collected recyclable material is open on the market to be sold for a profit. Private waste management companies sell the materials they collect, and local authorities may take a share of these profits or will have lower costs to pay relative to landfill.

Whilst recycling has traditionally been promoted as an environment action – and existing research certainly has understood it in this way (Barr & Glig, 2006) – major austerity cuts to public services have provided the conditions for the emergence of a new moral economy of recycling. There has been a noticeable shift in the narratives of waste policy; in 2007, the key aim of the Waste Strategy was to move towards 'One Planet Living' (DEFRA 2007), whereas in 2011, the emphasis was placed on not 'increasing costs at a time when we are facing real challenges in reducing the deficit' (DEFRA, 2011: 2). In the context of austerity, it is the need to reduce the deficit and stimulate a 'green economy' that is shaping waste management policies. What once was justified according to environmental principles is now being challenged because

of economic pressures, as a representative from the leading private management company, Veolia, confirmed.

*What's focusing the mind now is the austerity measures with the Councils. You know, at one time, it was a case of, 'Yes, we can recycle anything, and we'll just keep throwing trucks at it. We'll just keep doing that. It doesn't matter if it doesn't make economical sense'. But how far do you go before that balance between the economics and the environment can balance up to something that's tangible? Where's that line?*

The capacity of recycling to save public money is evident if we look at the political economy of waste management - with private sector dominance, costs of landfill disposal and the potential of recyclable materials to generate income for waste management companies/local authorities. This political economy of waste is beginning to influence how citizens are encouraged to recycle their waste.

In 2011, the Recycle for London communications programme (led by the Greater London Authority) launched a new campaign, called 'Nice Save!', making the connection between recycling and economic benefits explicit.

Last year Londoners saved £30 million by recycling. If everyone in London recycled everything they can, we would save £60 million next year (Recycle for London, 2012)

The 'Nice Save!' campaign informed residents how much they saved their local authority by recycling their waste (calculated on the basis of savings relative to landfill or incineration disposal). In the same year, the borough of Islington made recycling compulsory.

### **Why is Islington making recycling compulsory?**

Islington is home to a lot of people on low incomes and is the London borough hardest hit by cuts from central government. To protect your services, we need to save money wherever we can. One way of doing this is by recycling.

It costs £80 for every tonne of rubbish you throw out – but just £15 for every tonne of recycling. The cost of throwing rubbish away is also going to increase far more steeply in the future than the cost of recycling.

This is your money! Recycling more means the money saved can be spent on important Islington services rather than on throwing away rubbish.

(Islington Council Website, 2011)

Encouraging consumers to participate in this very different articulation of the moral economy of recycling, appeals to the collectivism inspired by the welfare state and can only be understood in the context of the institutional system of provision for waste management. Because of variations in recycling systems within England, not all local authorities communicate this message and environmental messages continue to be prevalent. However, this emerging moral message looks set to continue because of the way recycling is promoted by the third sector and how recycling is understood by consumers themselves.

#### Collective customs and the legitimacy of this moral economy

Unlike Sweden, third sector and environmental organisations have been very active in the promotion of recycling in England, revealing how organisations other than the state act to embed principles of environmental morality within political decision-making processes. Friends of the Earth (FoE) consistently comments upon and challenges government policies on waste. They were instrumental in the development of the Waste and Recycling Act 2002, which introduced kerbside collection, making it easy for consumers to recycle from home. At the local level, grassroots environmental networks have also organized protests against to building of incineration plants (a disposal solution pursued as an alternative to landfilling), believing them to be damaging to the environment and human health and thus asserting their communal right to protect the area in which they live. These collective ideas about protecting the local environment form the backdrop against which institutional systems of waste management provision develop.

Some incineration plants are successfully thwarted by local protesters, whilst others proceed. It is in this battleground that institutional moral economies of waste management are legitimized or challenged because unlike Sweden, citizens do not always trust the state to act in their best interests.

Most consumers do not get involved in local protests, however, and their participation in the moral economy of recycling is secured through the use of fines and incentives, alongside investments into recycling infrastructure (e.g. providing households with receptacles for recyclable waste). British policy has drawn extensively on the science of behavioural change in recent years, acknowledging that rational models of human behaviour cannot account for the socio-cultural contexts in which decisions about actions are taken. Citizens are 'nudged' into making the 'right' decision through changes to 'choice architectures' so that recycling becomes the easy option (Whitehead, Jones et al, 2011). We see some elements of this soft or liberal paternalism in the reduction of weekly rubbish collections, making recycling the default position for households wanting to get rid of waste stored within their homes. These infrastructural changes occur alongside more traditional models of behavioural change, e.g. fines for those who do not participate and rewards for those who do (such as RecycleBank in Windsor where consumers receive points to be spent in local stores depending on how much they recycle). At the level of collective customs, these infrastructural policies have sparked resistance and public debate. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, made the headlines in 2010 when he demanded that weekly rubbish collection be re-instated. He famously commented that:

*It's a basic right for every English man and woman to be able to put the remnants of their chicken tikka masala in their bin without having to wait a fortnight for it to be collected.*

(cited in Platell & Pierce, 2010)

This generated much debate about what consumers' rights and responsibilities are when handling their waste in national media and amongst third sector organisations. A campaign for weekly rubbish collections stated that weekly rubbish collections are damaging to public health because

they cause 'offensive odours', encourage pests, and will lead to a '21<sup>st</sup> century plague' (CWWC, 2011). Interestingly, Waste Watch (a think-tank) and FoE defended the moral economy of recycling by drawing on the economic value of recycling for the taxpayer rather than its environmental benefits. Waste Watch asks:

*Would anyone really put a weekly collection of waste above ensuring our fellow neighbours receive the care they need if they suffer from a disability or that the elderly receive support to heat their home in the winter?*

(Burns, 2012)

In this way, we see how the political economy of waste in the context of austerity was articulated (even by environmental movements) to legitimize changes to the collection infrastructure and challenge those who proclaimed they had a 'right to throw'. However, the success of these policies and appeals to the citizen-consumer to handle their waste responsibly rely on the lay normativities of those participating in the system.

### Lay normativities and the moral economy of recycling

When we turn to consumers' everyday practices, we learn that most people do recycle at least some of their waste and the reasons they provide for doing so range from a desire not to waste valuable resources, to environmental morality, to feelings of compulsion (either because of fines or fortnightly collections). In our household study, the threat of being fined was frequently mentioned; for example, Gemma (aged 30, works as a receptionist) described how she was told to start recycling or face a £20 fine. Consequently,

*We generally do it cos we're told to do it, if there was never any laws and we wasn't told any of this, everything would probably go in one bin.*

Unlike Sweden, where most cited the environment as their key motivation for recycling, the most common response to the question 'why do you recycle' from consumers in England was, 'because we have too'. However, this feeling of compulsion was often tempered by a belief that their actions were also benefitting the environment in some way. In particular, most consumers

imagined landfill sites as the final destination for their rubbish and recycling was one way they could act to prevent this.

*If you see what washes up in the sea on the beaches, it's absolutely horrendous and it's a waste if it's not recycled it's a massive waste. Landfill is grotesque, there's no need for it*

(Joan, aged 62, retired Dance-teacher, lives in Shropshire)

Consumers in England were acutely aware they were wasting resources by not recycling their waste. It was often morals around waste rather than environmental morality that informed understandings of recycling practices.

*I don't feel like it's because I've got this moral obligation to recycle, it's a service, it's logical, why wouldn't you? I'm not a green crusader and our cars kind of prove that but it's a logical thing to do. If you don't have to waste resources and you can do it then why not?*

(Claire, aged 35, Civil Servant, lives in Essex)

This awareness of the value of recyclable materials was effectively demonstrated by Brian and Ivy, an unemployed couple with three young children, who save all their metal cans to sell to scrap merchants for the 'kids holiday fund'. Here, we see how practices of handling waste materials reflect broader moralities of caring for one's family (Gregson, Metcalfe et al, 2007), made possible because this waste is not a producer responsibility.

Given it is only in the last year that the connection between recycling and saving public money has been made explicit, it is not surprising that few of those that participated in the household study were aware of it. However, the sense that not recycling one's rubbish is wasteful does resonate with this institutional framing of the moral economy and suggests it could be successful in encouraging people to recycle more, but only if citizens trust the state to spend this money wisely. On learning about the Nice Save campaign, Tim (PhD Student in his 40s) replied:

*I don't care; I don't believe in saving public money, I think they should spend more money! [...]  
There's plenty of money, they just don't wanna spend it on what they should spend it on; that's what I think!*

Mistrust between the state and its citizens can undermine the moral economy, particularly at a time when cuts to public services are damaging existing trust relations.

If consumers were not aware that recycling saved public money, they were aware of infrastructural changes in their collection systems and the knock-on effect these had on their daily handling of waste. It was agreed that provision of multiple boxes and bins made recycling a relatively easy action to incorporate into everyday routines – although many consumers struggled to store these receptacles and did not like the appearance of them in their homes. Liz (family-outreach worker in her 40s) described the recycling bag she kept in her kitchen as 'ugly, unsightly and horrible', suggesting that norms of recycling can clash with norms of cleanliness. Nevertheless, most people put up with this 'inconvenience' because they could see a value in recycling their waste (whether environmental or economic). English consumers are happy to participate in recycling schemes as long as it does not burden their routines too much – it is certainly not a source of national pride.

Families with young children did struggle with fortnightly collections and policies that restrict the amount of waste that can be discarded. Brian and Ivy have three children under four and their local council has refused to provide them with extra bin space, meaning that 'by the time the fortnight comes, there's 200 nappies in that bin' and little space for everything else. Ivy was very unhappy with her local authority and felt they were not 'thinking of us' when they told her to get on a bus with her three children (which she could not afford to do) to take the extra refuse to a recycling centre. In this case, changes to 'choice infrastructures' did little to convince Ivy that recycling was a worthwhile action, yet she recycled because she had little option to do otherwise.

By listening to these lay normativities, we learn that consumers in England participate because they feel compelled to through policies of enforcement (fines and fortnightly collections) and because they do not want to waste materials that could be put to better use than landfill. These lay moralities inform their practice of recycling and interact with moralities of care

(for one's own family, as well as the local environment) and norms of cleanliness, which then inform collective campaigns and public debates (right to throw and protests against waste disposal facilities) which can impact upon systems of provision. Morality and markets are co-constituted at these three levels. That recycling saves public money is certainly a less successful moral message in motivating the consumer to participate in recycling schemes, yet its resonance with existing lay normativities of thrift suggest it could be more successful – but only if governments are able to convince their citizens they are acting in their best interests and not putting the free market above fair and equal provision for all.

### **Moral economies compared**

Table 1 compares key elements of the recycling/waste management systems that together interact to generate distinctive moral economies of recycling in Sweden and England.

TABLE 1 HERE

These case studies have demonstrated how important it is to explore moral economies using a holistic analytical framework. By applying a framework that can encompass institutional systems of provision and state policies, with collective customs and individual lay normativities, we learn a great deal about the interplay and co-constitution of morals and markets. The state plays an important role in securing citizens' participation to these moral economies and the perceived legitimacy of their intervention is shaped through existing collective norms (often promoted through third-sector/grassroots movements) and the everyday evaluations of recycling practices by consumers. By looking at the division of labour within waste management we learn how reciprocal relations are established within economic processes which in turn influence how the benefits of recycling are shared within society. Collective responsibility and collective gain characterise the Swedish moral economy of recycling which perhaps explains its success amongst



citizen-consumers compared to the English system where the beneficiaries are not necessarily those that participate in the system. Levels of trust between the state and its citizens are also crucial for the success of moral economies, suggesting that government's actions across a whole range of issues influence citizens' expectations and beliefs about the benefits their actions might bring. Consumers operating in different socio-economic and political contexts are differentially enrolled into moral economies of recycling and this shapes their everyday understandings and interactions with their waste. How consumers reflect upon and debate the value of recycling varies by social context, revealing the importance of paying attention to all three levels of the moral economy framework if we want to understand how and why they are compelled to participate.

## **Conclusion**

This concluding section draws out the wider contributions of the arguments developed in this article. First, I have applied and developed a holistic moral economy framework to show how morals and markets are together constituted at the level of everyday reflections/consumer practice and at the level of institutional systems of provision. These moral principles are then mediated by collective customs that help secure the legitimacy and participation of individuals in wider economic systems and political processes. This article maintains that any attempt to understand the moral economy must pay attention to all three levels of this analytical framework to fully understand how morals are embedded within economic processes. There has been a tendency to pay attention to either individuals' lay normativities or the dynamics of institutional economic processes within social and moral issues, yet by exploring interactions between and within these levels – the interplay, the challenges and the acceptance – we gain greater understanding of the place of morality within the economy.

Second, I have argued that by listening to individuals' lay moralities, we discover how the success of behavioural change interventions relies not only on the provision of infrastructure but

on the interactions between citizens and their state and the perceived legitimacy of this intervention into their daily lives. When policies place demands on citizens and encourage them to change their routines, they must feel this intrusion in their personal lives is valid. How legitimacy is secured relies on the collective customs and beliefs that generate norms around how citizens ought to behave. In Sweden, the moral economy of recycling was very successful at the level of lay normativity because all parts of society are trusted to act in the best interests of the environment and this collective enterprise is celebrated as a source of national pride. In England, the moral economy is less successful because of diverging motivations to recycle (for profit, for the environment, to save money, to not use landfill or incineration technologies) and not all citizens benefit from the political economy of waste management. We can see this at the individual level when policy interventions create feelings of inequality and are perceived as an inconvenience. Listening to individuals' lay normativities in the context of particular institutional and cultural settings is crucial if we want to learn why citizen-consumers choose to participate (or not) and the values that are important to them, so policies can be developed that take account of these evaluations.

Finally, I have contributed to debates about the construction and mobilisation of citizen-consumers within comparative contexts. Recycling is a practice that is pursued by governments across the world that, in many cases, relies upon the willing participation of citizen-consumers. In keeping current scholarship on cultural variations in ethical consumer behaviour, I have argued that how consumers understand their responsibility for recycling is shaped by how the state and market are differentially instituted within society. Unlike Kjærnes, Harvey et al (2007), however, who found that those countries with high levels of trust in the state are the least likely to participate in consumer activism, consumers in Sweden were more disposed to recycle than their counterparts in England because of this trust. Diverse institutional divisions of labour and moral economies enable the consumer to enact their role as a citizen in quite different ways and

this is an important finding that requires further exploration across a range of consumer practices.

Taken together, these wider contributions point to the fruitfulness of renewing existing understandings of the concept of 'moral economy'. The approach presented here proposes due attention is given to the reflective capacities of people operating within the constraints of community norms and economic systems. Such an approach acknowledges that individuals and communities have the capacity to challenge or submit to market forces without the necessary intervention of the state. But at the same time, it accepts that individuals are often guided by contradictory goals in the pursuit of things that matter to them, meaning they can agree with or resist overarching community norms and demands of economic systems. By exploring morality at these three levels (which could be thought of as the micro, meso and macro levels), the moral economy is revealed as a relational concept that comes into being through the interactions and interdependencies between individuals, communities and political-economic structures. No one element is reducible to the other because moral-economic life is shaped and constituted by all three. Bringing together the different strands of existing scholarship on moral economy (inspired by Polanyi, Thompson and Sayer) into this revised framework offers social scientists the opportunity to study enduring concepts like inequality, power and justice within diverse political-economic systems without losing sight of the everyday lived experiences of people acting within them. It is hoped that this paper will act as a starting point for further empirical exploration of the co-constitution of morality and markets and the development of the relational concept of 'moral economy'.

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Table 1: Key Elements of moral economies of recycling in Sweden & England

	Sweden	England
Institutional system of provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State intervenes to protect the environment</li> <li>• Public, not-for-profit organisation and producer responsibility</li> <li>• Municipal-owned incineration plants generates cheap heat/electricity for households</li> <li>• One common system across Sweden</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State has not been proactive on environmental issues</li> <li>• Private sector dominance with recyclable materials open on the market to be sold</li> <li>• Privately-managed landfill disposal which is environmentally damaging and costly because of legislation</li> <li>• Much variation in systems of waste management provision across England</li> <li>• Austerity measures shaping waste management provision</li> </ul>
Collective customs and legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Third sector does not challenge practices of the state</li> <li>• Education of young children to protect nature, established collective tradition of care for environment/public spaces</li> <li>• No debate about environmental impact of incineration as citizens trust the state</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental movement and citizens active in placing recycling onto political agenda and defending public rights to environmentally-sound disposal systems.</li> <li>• Citizens nudged to recycle through infrastructural changes, fines and incentives</li> <li>• Public debates around weekly collections defended according to costs for the state</li> </ul>
Lay Normativities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recycle to protect environment for future generations</li> <li>• Some doubts around environmental gains of this practice but most still participate, even if this means incinerating waste</li> <li>• Proud of identity as leading recycling nation and the 'irresponsible other' undermines collective spirit of participation (immigrants)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recycle because of values of thrift and to protect environment from landfill</li> <li>• Infrastructural changes are generally positively received but can cause problems when they violate norms of cleanliness and care, and are experienced as unfair.</li> <li>• Less trust between state and citizens and recycling is not understood as a source of national pride or collective gain.</li> </ul>



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<sup>1</sup> The research programme 'Consumption Work and Societal Divisions of Labour' (DivLab 249430) is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Investigator Grant, led by Professor Miriam Glucksmann. I would like to thank and acknowledge Miriam for her contribution to this piece.

<sup>2</sup> To uncover regional variations, participants were recruited from Essex, Shropshire and South-East London. Recruitment adverts were placed into libraries, community centres and supermarkets in each area. A simple screening questionnaire ensured we sampled households in different socio-economic groups and stages of the life-course.

<sup>3</sup> Both studies (Ewert, Henriksson et al, 2009; Skill, 2008) explored recycling practices in different regions of Sweden using in-depth interviews.